



SEPTEMBER 24, 2026 - 11:00 a.m. - WORKSHOP and CITY MANAGER'S BRIEFING
CITY GOVERNMENT

OFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS OF THE MAYOR AND ALDERMEN
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

The work session was held at **11:03 a.m.**, in the 2nd Floor Media Room. Mayor Johnson, called the meeting to order, then recognized Alderman Kurtis Purtee to offer a prayer.

PRESENT:

Mayor Van R. Johnson, II
Alderwoman Carolyn H. Bell, At-Large, Post 1
Alderwoman Alicia Miller Blakely, At-Large, Post 2
Alderwoman Bernetta B. Lanier, District 1
Alderman Detric Leggett, District 2
Alderwoman Linda Wilder, District 3 - Vice Chair
Alderman Nick Palumbo, District 4 - Chairman
Alderwoman Dr. Estella Edwards Shabazz, District 5 - Mayor Pro Tem
Alderman Kurtis Purtee, District 6

ALSO, PRESENT:

City Manager Jay Melder
Assistant City Manager Taffanye Young
City Attorney Bates Lovett
Clerk of Council Mark Massey
Deputy Clerk of Council Gwendolyn Jones

Workshop Agenda Items

[1. Boards, Commissions, and Authorities Discussion.](#)

[Updated Boards List 2026 For 09-24-2026 Redacted.pdf](#)

Mayor Johnson facilitated a discussion on board appointments during which council members submitted nominations for various boards. The nominations are to be considered and voted upon during the September 24, 2026, Regular Council Meeting.

Mayor Johnson addressed the entries for the MLK parade by stating that the City is going to go ahead and utilize the trolley for those who want to ride on it. He mentioned another issue regarding his meeting(s) with the City Manager about the budget. Mayor Johnson stated that it is budget season, and last year, some of the council members indicated that they wanted more time for the budget retreat. As of now, and based on what has been done in the past, a day and a half has been slated for the retreat. Mayor Johnson asked the Council for their input about the amount of time they wanted for the retreat. He stated it is the Council's meeting, and it was up to the Council regarding the amount of time needed.

Ald. Wilder noted that most of the time was taken on presentations. She stated she wants to see more conversation about the desires of each district and how they affect the budget, as opposed to hearing more PowerPoint presentations from departments.

Ald. Palumbo agreed that maybe the retreat needs a different format or different presentation. He proposed that, for the first day, staff do their presentations, and for the second day, have an open house where each chief gets a room in City Hall and members of Council are available to go to each room and ask individual questions of each chief. Then the Council comes together in a workshop to discuss our findings: 1) Are we aligned with our strategic vision? 2) Do we have any policies that we want to change? Ald. Palumbo stated that this would allow the Council the chance to work individually and to work through each of the challenges that impact the councilmember's district in a more intimate environment to ask specific questions.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated she would like the Council to continue to be transparent, and being transparent is making sure cameras are in the room and the public can see what the Council is doing. She stated one of the most important things, as leaders of our City, is making sure this budget is good for the people. Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz asked for two (2) days in the process to hear what the staff has to say, for the Council to get the results of what we have asked for, and to focus on the budget itself.

Mayor Johnson noted that historically, it has been an opportunity to provide context for the work that has been done and then look forward to the work that is requested to be done. It seems like we focus a lot on the work that has been done. So it is harder to look forward to what needs to be done. He stated that he talked with the City Manager extensively about providing a schedule. Mayor Johnson further noted that if the Council wants five (5) days, we would give them five (5) days; if the format is just talking about the budget year that we are looking to approve, then we could address that too; and if the retreat could be done in the context of the strategic plan as it relates to the budget, well, all of these are in the council's purview.

Ald. Purtee stated he liked Ald. Palumbo's idea. He expressed that for him, as a council, we have to keep in mind that our job is to help direct the budget and form policies, look at ordinances, and be that directing governing body. Ald. Purtee stated that the Council has to be careful about getting so far in the weeds with the budget that they lose focus and sight of where they want to allocate funds because they all have wishes. He further stated that it is the City Manager's job to figure out how to get all these different pieces where they need to go, and it is the Council's job to help keep the City Manager in check. Ald. Purtee expressed that he did not want the Council to micromanage staff. He stated he was okay if the Council needs more time, but what he does not want to do is overburden staff and lose focus. Ald. Purtee further stated that he was okay with the two (2) days.

Mayor Johnson stated that, as of late, the retreat has been more of a day and a half. He stated the Council could move it to two (2) days if that would get us where we need to be. In the midst of the actual retreat itself, we also used our workshop sessions to flush out information; for example, parking lot items--councilmembers would ask questions, and staff would use that time to come back and address those issues.

Ald. Miller Blakely stated she did not see anything wrong with a day and a half as long as we are doing what we are supposed to do. Now, if there is more time needed, then that should be allocated at a different time. Ald. Miller Blakely stated she wanted to see more in-depth information - more line items, where the money actually is going, and who is actually getting the

money. She stated she wanted to see more equity spread across the board when it comes to certain areas as far as recreation, sanitation, and those types of things.

Ald. Leggett stated that the overwhelming sentiment from everybody is they want in-depth and precise information given by staff. We want staff to be prepared to provide us information so we do not have to ask for an extension. He further stated that we can have a day and a half, but we can set ourselves up for two (2) days; however, if we can do it in a day and a half, that would be a good thing. Ald. Leggett expressed that if the Council could not get to that point, it should be a space for them after the parking lot (workshop session) to have those questions answered.

Ald. Lanier stated we do need to change the format and have more precise information. She stated that it does not have to be redundant--the Council does not need to hear what they have heard in workshop again.

Mayor Johnson clarified what he has heard from members: they want more numbers, in terms of service delivery, and then specifics on what the Council is being asked for.

City Manager Melder mentioned the impact our current budget may have on the projections for next year's budget. He stated there was going to be very little room for new initiatives in the budget, and they would have to think about it in terms of some key items. City Manager Melder noted some of those key items to consider.

Mayor Johnson expressed his concern about the effect of the Big Beautiful Bill and the Social Security safety net that the federal government had used previously to protect people. He stated that we will find ourselves now having to help in ways that we have not helped before, which is going to be challenging. Mayor Johnson also mentioned the City's United Way campaign and encouraged 100% participation from City Council.

Ald. Leggett asked the City Manager if the City would be able to set some money aside in the budget to help people who are hurting because of their water bills and issues they are having. City Manager Melder responded.

[2. Urban Land Institute Southside TAP Briefing & Discussion](#)

[2. ULI Southside TAP Briefing & Discussion Presentation-- Repositioning the Southside.pdf](#)

City Manager Melder provided a brief overview of the redevelopment and community development initiatives across Savannah. He stated the next big step was the Southside repositioning that was part of a plan done several years ago with the Congress of New Urbanism. City Manager Melder explained how the City is continuing that work to try to move forward with repositioning the Southside into the assets and developments that our community wants to see. He reminded the Council that the City has almost \$20M in SPLOST funding for Southside Repositioning and Retrofit projects.

Planning & Urban Design Assistant Director Edward Morrow, Urban Land Institute Consultant Lance Morsell, Kimley-Horn Senior Landscape Architect Laura Ballock, Cooper Carry Associate Principal Arman Tolentino, and Pape-Dawson Vice President Grace Wooten gave the presentation.

Mayor Johnson stated that this represents another huge opportunity and the most extensive, expansive investment on the Southside in our city's history. " We can't mess it up."

Ald. Purtee stated that we knew seven years ago that (Savannah Mall) was dying, and then when the mall interior parts finally closed, we knew there was going to have to be some sort of conversation. Ald. Purtee acknowledged that one of the owners, who he had great conversations with, was in attendance. He further stated that it was interesting there has been so much unknown about this area/parcel. The conversations we have had with the community, and the challenges we have seen over the past seven years when we have met as a community, show that this study actually reflects our community meetings, the folks' concerns, and the challenges we are facing. Ald. Purtee stated he liked the idea, " Go big, we are already home." He stated he has been saying for a while that area is the south gateway into the city, and it is the first thing people see when they get off I-95 and are coming into Savannah. Ald. Purtee expressed that it was very reminiscent of the canal district--it is very complicated, but to do

nothing is not productive, and it hurts the community and the folks who have invested in the mall. He stated he thinks a P3 (Public-Private Partnership) operation is great and is the way to go, which raises a lot of questions about where we go from here. Ald. Purtee further stated he was sure there was going to be plenty more conversation on that. It is not just a direct impact on our districts (4th, 5th, and 6th); this is a citywide thing. Ald. Purtee thanked all who were involved in the ULI (Urban Land Institute) group for their hard work. He stated the ask he has is that we maintain transparency, communication, and engagement.

Ald. Miller Blakely thanked everyone for the presentation. She stated she happens to be a resident of the Southside for almost 50 years. She stated that when you talk about repositioning the Southside, you are talking a lot about the mall area, but she was looking at it from a much larger perspective. Ald. Miller Blakely expressed her concerns about the statement that the area has an identity, but lacks a soul. She stated the Southside has a lot of history that we do not talk about or touch. Ald. Miller Blakely stated she was referring to our Black, African American, Antebellum history. She stated she would like to see this history included, in addition to transportation and other activities people are asking for, such as types of activities like Dave & Buster's.

Ald. Palumbo stated we have made small steps, but it is time for us to make the giant leap. He stated he agrees with the Council that the vision is much larger than one single node. We had the vision in the 90s that this was the best place to put this monumental investment for the Savannah Mall. The location has not changed. The calculus has not changed. It is still our gateway to the city/southside. It is that central node; it is much larger than just one single site, and it has the potential to be that catalyst to pull all of this together. Ald. Palumbo congratulated and commended the ULI group for seeing the vision and understanding the monumental importance of not just this one site, but its citywide, countywide, and regional impact. Proximity to interstates, transportation, and more sets things in a community-driven direction.

Mayor Johnson expressed he would march towards equity in making sure that every area of the city has what it needs. This is an opportunity that has been kicked down the road for too long, and nothing big has ever been achieved by playing it small. Mayor Johnson stated this Council has really achieved an acumen for these big, bold, ambitious plans, and you see them all over the place, but more importantly, they include engagement and transparency, moving along at the speed of trust.

Ald. Lanier stated this is the right growth and development that is well planned and thought-out smart growth and development, and this a good process. She stated we hear over and over about the diversity piece, but of course, we know in order for us to do things differently and have better outcomes, we need to plan for that. Ald. Lanier stated we need to make sure we know what the history is to bring that soul into the project and to look further down to see where we need to be going. She stated every area has different needs, but in all of this development, our citizens need to be the primary stakeholder. Ald. Lanier expressed there should be an economic engine built into all of these hubs that makes sure there is a place where local people can go, get that energy of the economic development, and take part in this. We need to concentrate on local developers, builders, and contractors to give local people Savannah-first type of energy, especially to give the small business people an opportunity to have some type of leverage. Ald. Lanier stated she had an opportunity to work with the ULI in the past. She stated she understood the way and the approach ULI works and that this was good because ULI is always very inclusive.

[3. Legislative Agenda Preparation Discussion](#)

[3. Legislative Agenda Preparation Discussion Presentation--2027 Legislative Agenda.pdf](#)

City Manager Melder provided an overview of the importance of the legislative agenda. He then introduced Chief of Information and Public Affairs Joe Shearouse, Jr., and Policy and Intergovernmental Affairs Officer Meghan Sebold to present the legislative agenda preparation process.

Following the presentation, members of the Council discussed and asked questions.

Mayor Johnson stated this is our legislative agenda, and so, if there are things that are important to this Council, whether it flies in Atlanta or not, we need to say what they are. He expressed, as we engage in a more regional approach, it creates opportunities for us to find like-minded people or things that are important to our work that we could also support as well. Mayor Johnson said, "We stand ready, particularly during the session, when things go down, to either make a call, a ride, or a flight to get up there to block. "

Mayor Johnson advised the Council that staff will be coming around to all of them. He asked them to be prepared to be frank and honest, as the Council will come back and do a prioritization process from which they will derive their legislative agenda.

Ald. Wilder mentioned Senate Bill 539--tax exemption for feminine products. She asked for it to be considered. Chief Shearouse stated it was on our agenda and Senate Bill 539 did pass the Senate; however, it did not make it through the House, but they will continue to advocate for it.

Ald. Leggett asked the following questions:

- Is there anything in our ask (toolbox) about transportation as it pertains to our waterways and ferries that would help entities like Chatham Area Transit, since the bridge is going to be compromised for three years? Chief Shearouse and City Manager Melder responded.
- Do we have any updates on anything that was not put into our previous hotel/motel ask?
- In regard to PFAS remediation/Senate Bill 577, are we in a lawsuit? Attorney Lovett responded.
- Do we have anything on our upcoming legislative agenda about railroad crossings? Residents from the 2nd, 4th, and 5th districts want to know when they are going to extend the quiet zone. How are we looking for funding for those projects?

Ald. Lanier stated she would like to keep rental management on the legislative agenda because it is another way to look at dealing with rental increases or these exuberant rental increases. She stated she also would like to discuss having a position on the IP (International Property) property. Ald. Lanier stated it is not in the city, but it is surrounded by city neighborhoods. We need to have some type of position, and not act as if it is not going to be a significant impact on whatever happens there. She said we are hoping and praying that it is clean and smart development.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked about the small cells in the historic district. Chief Shearouse and City Manager Melder responded. Ald. Miller Blakely also expressed her concerns about companies laying fiber optics where the neighbors in the community had no knowledge of it. She stated we need to control this. City Manager Melder responded.

Ald. Bell asked about the Kerry Street Tower. She stated in terms of activity, at one point, it was a decent revenue generator. Chief Shearouse and City Manager Melder responded.

Mayor Johnson stated he had good conversations with some CSX and Norfolk folks. He stated the challenge is that by the time we get some leeway, they are not the person anymore.

Ald. Wilder asked, regarding CSX, is there some property that we have been trying to secure? (No, but we should re-engage.)

[4. Closed Executive Session: Personnel, Litigation and Real Estate: As Needed](#)

HELD. Ald. Palumbo moved to hold an executive session regarding real estate and litigation, seconded by Ald. Lanier and Ald. Wilder. The motion passed unanimously, 9-0-0.

Executive session started at 12:59 p.m. All City Council members were present, including City Manager Melder, City Attorney Lovett, Clerk Massey, and Deputy Clerk Jones.

No action was taken during executive session. The executive session concluded at 1:57 p.m.

[5. City Manager's Update: As Needed](#)

[Exhibit 1: Tuesday Night Memo Final 09222026.pdf](#)

No City Manager's Update was held.

Upon entertaining a motion and second, Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz adjourned the workshop/executive session at 1:57p.m., unanimously. No action was taken.

Mark Massey, Clerk of Council

Date Minutes Approved: _____

Signature: _____

The video recording of the Workshop can be found by copying and inserting the link below in your url:

<https://www.youtube.com/@cityofsavannah/videos>

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